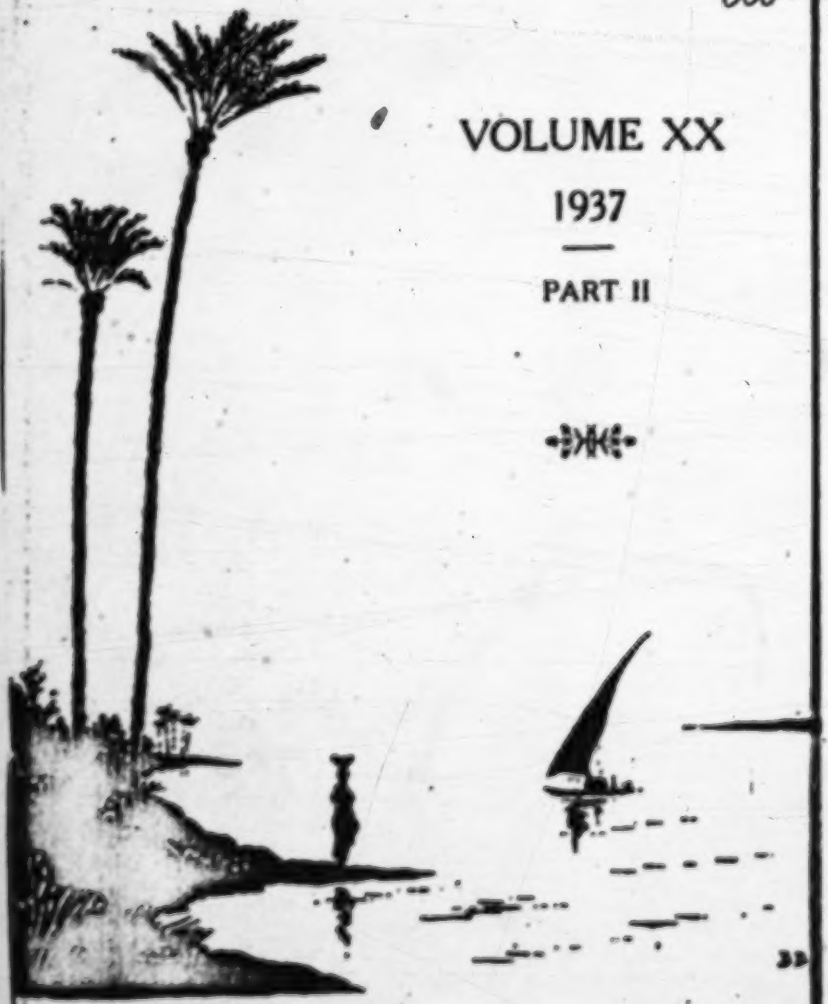
26: Pumphrey G-5 (1934-1937)1937
FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

SUDAN NOTES & RECORDS



VOLUME XX

1937

PART II

[TITLE PAGE]

26: Pumphrey G-5 (1934-1937)1937
FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

SHILLUK "ROYAL" LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS.

By M. E. C. Pumphrey.

THE Shilluk divide themselves with great distinctness into two divisions, namely "Royal Blood" (Shil., KWAR RETH) and "Shilluk" (Shil., COLLO). KWAR RETH includes, with the exception of a single distant branch called the "Ororo," all the living patrilineal descendants of the semi-mythical but historical Nyikang Okwa, who, in about 1540, is supposed to have led a party from the neighbourhood of Wau into the present Shilluk country.

Within the KWAR RETH there are three higher titles. These are *Reth*, for the reigning king; *Nyireth*, for the son of a king, reigning or dead; and *Nyareth* or *Nyinyireth*, for the son of a *Nyireth*. All other members of the KWAR RETH are entitled *Kwar Nyireth*, which is elided into *Kwa'nyireth*. All KWAR RETH should be addressed by prefixing their title to their names or else by the use of their titles alone, an exception to this last being that you never address the Reth as *Reth* but use the appellation *Wuo*.

The Shilluk say that they found the Fung in the present Shilluk country and that they drove them out northwards. Undoubtedly, however, many remained as an inferior caste, and there are still traces of a Kwar Funy (Funy clan). The remaining Fung, together with the reputedly small band of Shilluk who accompanied Nyikang, presumably form, with subsequent accretions, the ancestors of the COLLO. Nyikang and his sons are the ancestors of the KWAR RETH.

When using the Shilluk language it is important not only to use the proper title when addressing a member of the KWAR RETH but also to make certain deferential modifications in some words and expressions. Only some of these modifications are necessary when addressing a mere *Kwa'nyireth* (largely those of implying divine intervention in all verbs of motion), but when addressing the Reth certain fictions have to be borne carefully in mind.

For example, the *Reth* and, less rigorously, District Commissioners and their assistants do not sleep. Strangely enough, they go out to graze (Shil., *kwai*). They never exist unaided. When not more specifically

[p. 319]

26: Pumphrey G-5 (1934-1937)1937
FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

195 643 648 [576] employed they are being nursed by God (Shil., *mith yi Jwok*). They do not go to, come from or enter a house: they are taken to, brought from or stuffed into a house (as the case may be) by God. God is supposedly the sole motive power of such ethereal beings. Sometimes this fiction produces strange complications in the syntax, and another difficulty is that in replying you must be careful to use the ordinary word in relation to yourself, thus tacitly deprecating the idea of any divine agency as far as you are concerned.

195 643 The *Reth*'s head is respectfully designated his "pebble," his pipe is his "mud," his beer is his "water" and his donkey is his "dog." When he sits on the ground he is said to have "come to anchor" (Shil., *amak*). When he gets up he is, of course, lifted by God. It seems that the terms used for royal objects are not, as might have been expected, names of things superior to the actual object, but that they are inferior substitutes. An explanation may be that in the magnificence of the royal presence the objects surrounding him lose half their natural lustre.

195 643 648 539 In the following dialogue the Shilluk expressions which would be used are translated as exactly as possible into English. If there is anything comic in it, it must be stressed that this is purely incidental to the purpose of this note (which is serious).

Scene—FASHODA. The District Commissioner stops the lorry outside the royal houseto pick up the *Reth* to take him to Kodok to meet the Governor.

D.C. (*by way of greeting*): You have been out grazing, Father?

RETH (*deprecatingly*): I have slept; have you been out to graze?

D.C.: Yes, thank you, I have slept.

RETH: You have been brought by God?

D.C.: I have come.

RETH: You are being nursed by God?

D.C.: I am quite well, thank you; now, are you ready to be taken by God to Kodok? If so, be lifted up by God into the front seat beside me and we will be off; . . . but wait; have you got that thing for your pebble which the Governor-General gave you?

RETH: Oh, I am so sorry. I have forgotten to get it. I will go and fetch it. Meanwhile, you be taken by God in the lorry to that tree, turn

26: Pumphrey G-5 (1934-1937)1937
FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

round, and be brought back here again by God. I will be back here in a second. 195 643

D.C.: Be taken away by God. (*D.C. turns the lorry round and awaits the Reth.*) You have found it? Good. Now we are off. . . . I thought you would be nursed by God in Kodok over the week-end as there are many cases I want you to see. Then you can be taken back to Fashoda by God on Monday on your dog. 648 539

RETH: Yes, I can return on Monday on my donkey.